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ABSTRACT

This document contains two papers devoted to human resource development (HRD), the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD), and certification. The first paper, "Certification of HRD Professionals, Products, and Academic Programs--The Role of AHRD" (Michael Leimbach), is intended to facilitate dialogue on the AHRD's role in establishing standards and certification in HRD. The various stages of certification (defining standards, data sharing, endorsement) are discussed, as are problems with certification. It is argued that the AHRD should be cautious, especially during those stages of certification that involve product evaluation and endorsement. The second paper, "Human Resource Development Certification: A Strategy for Leading the HRD Profession through Research" (Catherine M. Sleezer, Dale E. Kunneman), presents a strategy for enacting the AHRD vision by developing and implementing certification. Special attention is paid to the following three topics: (1) ways certification and consumer report information from other fields can be applied to HRD; (2) measurement issues relevant to certification (reliability, validity, relevance, feasibility); and (3) the benefits of AHRD certification of HRD professionals, products, and programs. (MN)

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HRD Town Forum - An AHRD Tradition

Certification of HRD Professionals, Products and Academic Programs: The Role of the Academy of Human Resource Development

HRD Certification: A Strategy for Leading the Profession through Research

Catherine M. Sleezer, Oklahoma State University

Certification of HRD Professionals, Products and Academic Programs: The Role of AHRD

Michael Leimbach, Wilson Learning Corporation, AHRD Global 100 Member

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Certification of HRD Professionals, Products, and Academic Programs-The Role of AHRD

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As our profession grows, both in size and importance to organizational performance, we inevitably are confronted with the issue of industry-wide standards, and how to hold organizations and people accountable to those standards. Should the Academy of HRD be involved in establishing standards and certification in HRD? If so, how should the Academy be involved? The purpose of this paper is to help facilitate a dialogue on the role of AHRD in Certification. A description of certification is presented which suggests that there are several stages of certification. I then present arguments for why AHRD should be cautions, especially at the stages of certification that involve product evaluation and endorsement.

US organizations budgeted more that $58 billion for training in 1997 an expenditure that continues to rise, increasing 5 percent over the 1996 figure (Training, October 1997). Of this, over $13 billion was spent on purchased programs and services while approximately $22 billion was spent on employing HRD professional within their organizations. Organizations make this expenditure because they are aware of the importance of developing the talents and capabilities of their employees. Employees working together within an organization provide an important source of competitive advantage (Wimbiscus, 1995), some say the only source of competitive advantage (D'Aveni, 1994; Ehlen, 1995). In addition, because HRD is a growing industry an increasing number of students are choosing to enter the HRD profession, and choosing programs of higher learning to acquire the skills organizations need.

It is clear that some kind of information, or certification of quality could have a tremendous impact on our industry and profession. If certification of training programs, for example, could result in a small incremental improvement in the quality of purchases, corporations could save millions (e.g. a 2% improvement in purchasing decision making would translate into $20 Million). If information about programs could help students make better matches between their needs and the offering of an academic program, our profession would grow that much faster. And as new roles within HRD come into existence, information about the qualifications of potential employees will help organizations make better comparisons between the human resources and the activities and responsibilities across professionals.

Despite this need there is a dearth of third party information about quality within our industry. Organizations are provided with little unbiased information on the quality of the products they purchase (Passmore, Sleezer, Wise, and Passmore, 1993). Students rely on information distributed by the academic programs, or general rating of college-wide comparative quality. As our profession becomes increasingly important to sustained organizational growth and strategy implementation, the need for this information becomes more acutely felt. I believe that there is wide agreement that certification of professionals, products, and academic programs could be useful to the growth of our discipline and industry. Nor is it a question of whether AHRD has a role to play in assuring quality of human resource development professionals, programs, and products. I believe that the reason most of use are members or attend the conference is because we believe that AHRD is advancing our field. The question is not whether the Academy should be involved in certification. No other professional body is better prepared to address this issue. Rather, the central question is what is the most appropriate role for AHRD in the certification process.

The purpose of this paper is not to resolve this issue, but to describe why I believe that the Academy should move cautiously toward the issue of certification. I will begin with a description of certification, including a definition of the components and a description of some of the options for certification. I will then present some key reasons why AHRD should not, at this time, be directly involved in full certification. It would be a mistake for the Academy to take on certification at this time. While the intent of this discussion is to cover certification of professionals, products and academic program, trying to address all three at onces could be confusing. Therefore, I have framed most of my discussion on the topic most salient today, certification of HRD products. Human Resource Development is saturated with products. Some products are high quality and some are quick-fix, flavor-of-the-month, buzz-worded remnants of a slick sales job. These later products not only don't work, but also absorb HRD budgets and deplete the credibility of those delivering them. Without some form of certification the quality and utility of these products can only be determined after they are purchased and delivered. At this point, it is too late.

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While my arguments are directed toward products, I believe they also apply to the other two domains – HRD professionals and academic programs.

What is Certification

To begin, we need to address the question, what is certification? The American Heritage Dictionary defines certification as the act of "confirming formally as true, accurate, or genuine. To guarantee as meeting a standard." In practice, however, individuals and organizations apply this term to a large number of activities and outputs. While there is no agreed upon use of the term "certification" most applications share one or more of the following elements: standards, data sharing, and endorsement. While not necessarily steps in a certification process, it can be useful to discuss certification as a three-step process leading to full certification/endorcement.

Defining Standards

The first step in development of any type of certification is the definition of the standards of certification. For HRD this is an important step as many current scholars agree that performance standards in our industry are poorly defined or non-existent (Holton, 1998) and the search for readily reportable measures of quality has been fraught with troubles (Edgman-Levitan, 1998). As a first step in certification, standards are a descriptive component, not evaluative. The purpose of setting standards is to define a set of characteristics, activities, or outcomes that individuals can use to compare and contrast different products. The standard is a descriptive statement of a desired state, not an evaluation of a specific instance and whether or not it meets the standard. Standards serve to describe the parameters of quality, not measure quality. Standards of quality can take many forms but are principally grouped into three types: technical, process, and utility/impact.

Some standards address technical characteristics. For example Underwriters Laboratories (UL) has standards for the design of electrical circuitry and grounding of home appliances. The US federal government has standards for radio and TV broadcasts. Technical standards address concrete, tangible characteristics of products. Within HRD there are some technical elements we can create standards for, but most are not very useful in describing the quality of products. For example, we could set standards on the presence of learning objectives in the materials, the types of learning activities, etc. However, because the vast majority of products meet these specifications, these standards would not help in differentiating products.

Process standards are standards focused on how a product is made. A good example of process standards are the standards behind ISO certification (ISO, 1991). ISO standards do not directly characterize the technical specifications of a product but defines quality standards for the processes used to develop and manufacture the product. Similarly HRD products are often evaluated relative to the extent to which they meet instructional design and development process.

Standards can also address utility or impact. If technical standards are equivalent to Demmings concept of "Conformance to specifications," utility standards might best be compared to Jurans "Fitness for use." The essence of utility standards is specification of the outcomes intended by the product. For example, one standard for HRD products could be that the product developer not make claims that can not be substantiated by factual documentation. Or, a standard that utility or impact of a product be substantiated by a study using accepted research methodology.

Standards are an essential first step, but alone they also can guide and advance the industry. For example, standards for TV broadcasting insure that all TVs can receive every broadcast signal. The value of a standard is largely determined by the credibility of the organization setting the standard and the voluntarily compliance of the industry to apply the standard.

Data Sharing

In our industry today, most unbiased information is provided through what Willenborg (1985) refers to as personal product knowledge. A buyer of a product bases choices on personal experience or inspection, or gathers opinions from colleagues. Similar processes are followed for students selecting an academic program. A more formalized form of data sharing occurs when an organization takes responsibility for collecting data, formatting it in a way that allows users to make comparisons, and distributes that data. Formalized data sharing assumes that some set of standards have been defined. While absolute standards are not required (e.g. "A two-ton truck should have a minimum of a 450 horsepower engine) there at least need to be clear categories of standards defined (e.g. all descriptions of two-ton trucks include horsepower ratings).

Data sharing can cover any and all of the standard types (technical, process, and utility). In addition, data sharing can also include information on consumer reactions to the product. Organizing and sharing data is, of course, a first step in certifying the quality of a product. However, it can stop short of actually certifying or endorsing a product. Probably one of the best current examples are the reader comments presented on amazon.com. Amazon.com, through their web sit, allows visitors to submit comments about books they have read. The reader also has the option of providing a rating (1 to 5 stars) of overall quality. Amazon.com does not filter or select these comments both good and bad reviews make it to the database. The site visitor is also aware of the limitations; comments represent personal opinions, the reviewer may have a personal bias or interest, and there is seldom enough data to make the ratings a reliable indicator of quality.

There is clearly a role for some organization to provide third party, or neutral, information on HRD products. While more involved than defining a set of standards, the Academy could get involved in communicating information on products as a neutral third party. This would not have to include evaluation, just reporting of information. Again, that reporting can take many forms. The academy can document technical characteristics, base upon technical standards described above. Information can also be provided on the documentation of utility or impact claims. For example, if an organization promotes a sales training program as "increasing sales" the Academy could provide information on whether or not the organization actually does have documentation that sales increased as a result of training. This falls short of certifying to the quality of that documentation (i.e. appropriately designed research, sufficient sample, statistically significant results, etc) just a reporting of the substantiation of the claim.

Alternatively, the Academy could serve as a "clearing house for consumer based information. Numerous list-serves do this now informally (we have all seen messages that being; "Has anyone used XYZ program and have on opinion on it?). A process could be designed similar to Amazon.com's consumer ratings/comments, using our web-site to collect and disseminate the information.

Endorsement

The final element is actual endorsement of quality. For many people the act of certification is synonymous with endorsement and it clearly closest to the dictionary definition. As a result of certification, certain products are given a "stamp of approval," and certain products are not. It is also a statement of warranty. A product certified by UL is a warranty that the product, under normal use, will not electrocute the user. Again, as in standards and providing information, different types of quality can be certified.

Technical quality can be certified. This is essentially what UL does, it examines products to assure that they meet appropriate standards for circuit design, grounding, and other specifications that warrant the safety of the product. It is important to note that UL, like most certifications, is narrow. UL does not certify that the toaster will make good toast, just that the toaster won't kill you. Within HRD the Academy could take on a certification to a set of technical standards. For example, do the programs contain appropriate instructional objects and do the activities follow adult instructional design parameters that will appropriately lead to those objectives.

Process quality can be certified. This is essentially the type of certification that ISO 9000 provides. ISO certification is not certification of the final quality of the product, but certifying that the organization engages in activities that will likely produce quality products. An analogy within HRD might be to certify the design and development and evaluation processes related to products. For example, can the vendor provide documentation that appropriate design analyses were performed, that learning objectives were appropriately developed, and that outcome claims were appropriately researched?

A third type of certification is outcome testing. Comparative product testing has been performed for decades. From whose french fries are the best to which laundry detergent gets clothes the brightest, the objective comparisons continue. Perhaps the most widely recognized example of this is Consumer Reports magazine. While much of what Consumer Reports provides might be best classified as data sharing, they also provide a direct comparison of product quality and make recommendations as to which products have the highest quality or are "best buys." Applied to HRD, an organization could take on the responsibility of doing direct product testing, or evaluate the tests done by others, and make recommendations, or certify to the utility of the product.

A fourth type of certification is customer satisfaction comparisons. Choosing this approach would make AHRD the J. D. Powers of the training and development industry. This goes beyond mere sharing of customer data (such as amazon.com) but implies a carefully controlled survey of customers that allow product to product comparisons. For example J. D. Powers uses sophisticated sample selection and analysis process that allow them to say that buyers of Mercedes and more satisfied than buyers of Lincolns (Reichheld, 1996). Thus, while not a direct measure or testing of product quality, different products can be compared via an unbiased sampling of users.

Problems with Certification

As stated earlier, I believe that there is strong support among Academy members for development of common standards. I also believe that AHRD should play a central role in this effort. I would also suggest that that the Academy might play a central role in providing unbiased information (sharing information) on adherence to quality standards. However, the question of certifying/endorcing products in our industry is fraught with dangers. Should the membership of the Academy not just communicate a set of standards in these three areas, but take responsibility for monitoring the degree to which these standards are met, and placing our "stamp of approval" on them? I believe there are several fundamental arguments why we should approach this effort with extreme caution. In this paper I will focus on the following:

- Talk of certification is pre-mature
- The important characteristics are largely qualitative in nature.
- The responsibility and liability is too high.
- Being the arbiter of certification is inconsistent with our mission of inclusion
- The certification process could consume the Academy
- Certification reinforces a static product orientation in the industry

Talk of Certification is Pre-mature

Certification comes after debate and the formation of consensus on a set of standards. Right now, there are no universally accepted standards for products in HRD. While I support an effort to define standards for HRD products, and believe that there might be a role for AHRD in sharing information about products, we are a long way away from being ready to commit to certification. We need to define these standards before moving on to certification. This also applies to standards for HRD professional and academic programs. While we have some standards in our industry, for example McLagan's Models for Excellence (1989) for training and development, none are specific to our industry as a whole.

Important Characteristics are Largely Qualitative

The important characteristics of products that will provide guidance to users are still largely qualitative in nature. Elements, such as the impact of a program on organizational or individual performance, are either qualitative, or where there are concrete measures, there is a subjective judgment as to the quality of the process used to collect those measures.

For example, take a sales training program. The concrete elements are things like length, presence of learning objectives, number of exercises, case studies, lectures, etc. While these are subject to little interpretation, they are also not very useful to a potential buying decision. So, we go deeper. The distributors of the program claim that the product "will improve the performance of a sales organization." How do we certify that claim? They don't say significantly improve or say "by 10%" so can we apply statistical criteria? Let's say they provide evidence in the form of a case study, showing that the sales organization did increase sales. What criteria do we use to say whether that is adequate or inadequate evidence of improvement? What if they presented 2 cases studies, or 5 or 10? What if they presented 10 cases studies, and showed the analysis that these 10 cases demonstrated statistical significance for sales improvement pre and post sales training? What if all 10 cases were computer companies and there were no controls for the rapid rise in computer equipment sales?

Ultimately it comes down to a judgment as to when the research evidence is sufficient to justify certifying a claim. Add to that the question of what we are certifying. Are certifying that the content of the program is supported by research (what do you do with NLP)? Are we certifying the instructional design? Or do we focus only on the result claims? We could chose to certify technical or process elements of products, but if we choose to certify to these, we will need to bridge that gap between certification and performance. What value is certification if the user does not believe there to be a connection between certification and performance? For example, is it widely accepted among practitioners that products with well-written instructional objectives are better than products lacking instructional objectives?

The Responsibility and Liability is Too High

Certification carries with it certain responsibilities and legal liabilities. How will vendors react to one of their products not being certified? Is the Academy ready to defend the process in court? Is there sufficient case law that will allow us to defend our certification process? These are all questions that need to be answered before we begin to certify products. Beyond the legal liabilities, what are the potential liabilities? Is there a conflict of interest, perceived or actual, within the Academy? Will member organizations be perceived to have an advantage in the certification process? Will academic programs whose faculty and students are members be perceived to have an advantage?

Certification is Inconsistent with Our Mission of Inclusion

We are an inclusive organization. What I value most in AHRD is the diversity of ideas and approaches. The process of certification is by definition exclusionary. One of the strengths of the Academy as an organization is the broad acceptance of approaches, research methodologies, disciplines and perspectives. Certification is one step toward an environment of exclusion. For example, if we choose as part of our certification process the requirement that claims of product impact use research methods consistent with the scientific method, will that ultimately lead professionals in our discipline who favor a phenomenological, case study, or qualitative methodology to leave the Academy. If we choose to accept more qualitative methods as evidence of impact, are we marginalizing the values of those who accept comparative scientific methods as the only true way to test hypotheses?

Certification Could Consume the Academy

Conducting certification will be a very big job. Does AHRD what to build the infrastructure to do this and will it consume the time and efforts of our governing board, to the detriment of other activities? Even if we just limit certification to products, and just to the US, there are still an overwhelming number of objects to certify. Add to that the fact that most products have numerous applications. The number of products and applications of those products is so vast, providing a fair and consistent certification may not be feasible for the Academy. Also, it will be difficult to determine conformity of two products to a common test. Rarely are two products so similar in purpose and intent that they permit easy/fair comparison.

Reinforcing a Static Product Orientation

Certification will need to define a unit of analysis. The one discussed most widely has been the product (a seminar, CD-ROM, guide, etc.). This is probably a necessary limitation of certification — it is difficult to certify multi-component systems. However, we as an industry are rapidly moving toward a systems perspective on HRD (Rummler & Brache, 1995). We treat as a given that the key to enhancing the effectiveness of learning is to see it as a process, with multiple components supporting learning application and transfer to the work environment. Using the example described above, we can certify the quality or impact of the sales training program. But doesn't certification of the program miss the point when a multi-dimensional effort that includes aligned compensation, application tools, incentives, management support (and yes, training), is much more consistent with our view of performance improvement? While a product is a feasible object of certification, the process – which resists precise description and certification – deserves our endorsement. If we certify programs, will we reinforce an orientation we know to be false? Will we "freeze" our vision of the industry to a standard that we know is limiting the impact of HRD today?

Is Certification Consistent with the Mission of AHRD?

It is my perspective, for the reasons cited about, that AHRD should not become involved in certification (i.e. endorsements) of HRD products. While the Academy should consider developing and disseminating standards for products, and creating a process to help buyers of products apply these standards in their selection of products; the Academy should not enter this arena as a certifying agency. Rather, I believe that the Academy must, first and foremost, uphold its mission to "lead the profession through research." We can honor this mission without taking on the burdens of liability, infrastructure, and uncertainty that certification entails.

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Human Resource Development Certification: A Strategy for Leading the HRD Profession through Research

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This paper presents a strategy to enact the Academy of Human Resource Development vision by developing and implementing certification. It identifies the critical needs for such certification and then examines how certification and consumer-report information from other fields can be applied to human resource development. The paper argues that currently individuals, organizations, and the profession pay high costs for substandard products, and that it is time to stop paying.

The vision for the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) is to lead the human resource development (HRD) profession through research. In this paper, we present a strategy to enact the vision by developing and implementing certification for HRD products and programs. We answer two questions: "Why certify?" and "Is HRD certification feasible?" This article begins by outlining the critical need for HRD certification. We argue that certifying HRD products (e.g., conferences, workshops, customized interventions, and training materials) and HRD programs (e.g., academic and certification efforts) can provide some assurance that they do what they say they will do, and that they reflect accepted HRD theory and practice. Further, certifying HRD programs can assure that the professionals in our field have the skills and the knowledge of HRD theory and practice that they need to effectively perform their work. Because both HRD products and programs are considered by consumers to be HRD products that have costs and expected values, we use the term products in this paper to encompass both terms. After outlining the critical need, we examine the certification and consumer report information presented in the literature and describe its application to the HRD certification. We conclude by showing how HRD certification can benefit individuals, organizations, and the HRD profession.

Critical Need for HRD Certification

When employees working together within an organization produce rare or unique processes that are difficult for others to copy, they provide a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). So, it is not surprising that organizational decision makers are investing increasingly in HRD interventions that purport to optimize the performance of individuals, teams, and the entire organization. Examples of such efforts include training employees, organizing high performance work teams and systems, implementing total quality management, and facilitating employee empowerment.

The investment in HRD products is staggering. U.S. organizations with 100 or more employees budgeted over $58.6 billion for training in 1997, a 5 percent increase over 1996 (Training, October, 1997). Outside expenditures comprised of seminars and conferences, hardware, off-the-shelf materials, outside services, and custom materials accounted for $13.6 billion, 23% of the total training budget. The 1999 American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) State of the Industry Report noted increases in many categories in 1998 including training expenditures, proportions of people trained, and use of external training providers (Bassi & Van Buren, 1999). The increased investment in HRD has led, in turn, to increased expectations for HRD accountability (Brinkerhoff, 1987; Swanson, 1994).

The increased investment in HRD and the corresponding increase in accountability highlight a problem: there is great variation in the effectiveness of HRD efforts. It has been estimated that 50% of HRD efforts are ineffective. Decision-makers who wish to purchase the most effective, least costly, research-based HRD products and services

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for their situation face a daunting task. To be successful, the decision makers must first access literature that is written in research-based jargon. The decision makers must also have the requisite time and expertise to review and synthesize the wealth of information available on the topic of interest (Bassi, 1998). So, it is not surprising that decision makers often fail to consult scholars (Bassi, 1998) and, instead, rely on vendor materials from mailings and conferences in making their purchasing decisions.

Basing HRD purchasing decisions on the endorsements contained in vendor brochures and catalogues or touted by vendors at professional conferences is problematic for several reasons. First, the proliferation of HRD products in the marketplace and the different names used for virtually identical offerings makes wading through all the options to comparison shop virtually impossible. Second, vendor materials may be biased, inaccurate, or misleading. Some HRD products offer high quality solutions, and others offer quick fix, faddish solutions. While the marketing materials for both types of products may look similar, the latter products are not integrated with the economic realities of the business, the current systems, or the psychological needs of the individuals within the organization (Evarts, 1998). The quick fix, faddish products often fail to make a lasting positive impact on organization performance. Such failures not only absorb organization resources, but also may leave organizations in a diminished competitive position (Sleezer, Zhang, Maile, & Gradous, in press). Third, vendors who obtain market and financial success with products have little motivation for seeking new research and product improvements, especially when if they can increase sales by doing more marketing. The predicament for decision makers is that the quality and utility of HRD products often cannot be determined until after they have been purchased and used and have produced a positive or negative impact on individuals, teams, and the organization.

In other arenas, well-educated consumers have found refuge in certification and consumer reporting processes that inform, educate, and protect the consumer. In arguing that the AHRD should develop and implement HRD certification, we should recognize that an organization with a vision of leading the HRD profession through research has an important role to play in informing, educating, and protecting HRD consumers. Such a role would assure that HRD professionals have the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to do their work and that HRD products and programs do what they say they will do and reflect accepted HRD theory and practice.

We also should consider carefully Swanson's (1997) assertion that some are profiting from the lack of standards in the field. "Maintaining the present substandard conditions is lucrative for profit providers of conferences and trade publications, publishers of books and media, circuit 'celebrities' and fad consultants" (p. 1-20). Can we as a professional association with our vision of leading the field through research tolerate such substandard conditions? The answer to this question reflects the values of AHRD members and informs the discussion about the importance of HRD certification.

Finally, we should acknowledge and celebrate that assuming the role of informing, educating, and protecting consumers will differentiate AHRD from the professional associations in our field that profit from hyping and marketing quick-fix, faddish solutions and products to their members and other consumers. We have answered the question about the importance of HRD certification, now we turn to the question of feasibility.

What is involved in Certification and Consumer Reporting?

In this section, we examine terminology and describe consumer organizations and aims. We also apply these concepts to the HRD profession.

Terminology

The term "certify" has been defined as "attesting as being true or as represented or as meeting a standard" (Webster's, 1977, p. 182). A certificate is a document that indicates that one has fulfilled the requirements and may practice in a field. From birth to death, certification for individuals and organizations is pervasive. Seldom do most of us even consider the alternatives. Riding in an uncertified elevator, flying with an uncertified pilot, or selecting a non-certified dentist or marriage counselor seem preposterous ideas. Is using un-certified HRD programs any less risky? Using certified professionals, products, and programs does not guarantee success; however, it does assure that certain standards have been met.

The concept of comparative product testing and consumer reporting are important to HRD certification. Comparative product testing can be defined as "determining if, and to what degree, relevant features are found to have constituent characteristics of a representative number of brands and types of a certain product" (Silberer, 1985, p. 2). Constituent characteristics are those characteristics commonly found in a specified product group. Because the results of compared products can be published and the prices of the products listed, the definition emphasizes the relationship between consumer and product. Comparative product testing has been performed for decades. From whose French fries are the best to which laundry detergent gets clothes the brightest, the comparisons continue.

The terms "certification," "consumer reporting," and "comparative product testing" emphasize determining product quality and communicating that information with consumers. Because the terms "quality" and "consumer" are key to our discussion, we turn next to those definitions.

Defining the Term "Quality"

The term quality has been defined and viewed in various ways. In this paper we present three views that are useful for discussing HRD certification. Quality as defined by the International Standards Organization (ISO) is "the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear upon its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs" (International Standard ISO/IEC 9126, 1991). Technical quality is the extent to which a product meets the technical specifications for which it was designed. It is implied that the design satisfies the requirements and wishes of the consumer. Producers may restrict themselves to defining the consumer's wishes and needs without actually consulting the target group for the product (Melrose, 1996).

Quality of utility refers to the extent to which a product meets the requirements for use. The consumers' purposes can be derived from their needs and their uses for the product. In this perspective, the concept of consumers and their uses for a product are important in determining its quality.

Economic quality is the ratio between the utility of a product and its price. Consider the example of drinking the glass of water that is served free with a meal versus ordering a soda. The economic utility of water is greater than soda (assuming the desired benefit is to quench thirst and wash down food).

When comparing the three definitions, technical quality relies mostly on criteria established by the producer, whereas quality of utility relies mostly on criteria relevant to the consumer. Economic quality considers the quality of a product from the viewpoint of the consumer in terms of return on investment (Melrose, 1996).

Defining the Term "Consumer"

The consumer can be defined as the buyer, user or disposer of products or services (Kanis, 1988). Before a consumer makes the decision to purchase, he or she normally tries to assess various aspects of quality for the different brands, models and types of products or services offered. One type of assessment information consists of personal knowledge, experience or inspection of the product, or personal product information from fellow-consumers (Willenborg, 1985).

A second type of assessment information consists of commercial product information. In many cases, consumers do not have access to critical information concerning a product's characteristics, features, and functions. The product's producer or supplier is an external source of information. However, information from this source often is intended to simply promote and increase product sales. Needless to say, the information provided may be persuasive or incomplete. Moreover, the product information is seldom presented in a way that allows consumers to easily compare the information for different products (Willenborg, 1985).

A third type of assessment information consists of neutral product information. This information includes data about product characteristics that can be measured and that consumers consider when buying a product. Consumers can use product information to assess the quality of a product and to compare different product alternatives. They can also use the information to learn the correct ways of using a product (Willenborg, 1985). By comparison to commercial product information, neutral product information has an objective character and typically is supplied without any commercial purposes. Examples of this category of consumer information are the comparative product tests from consumer associations. As a result of consumer-oriented product testing, an extraordinarily high level of

voluntary industry commitments can be made to purchasers and consumers (Niedzielski, 1997).

In applying information from the certification and consumer testing literature to HRD certification, we recognize that the process would involve determining product quality and communicating it with consumers. The constituent characteristics of HRD products can be determined by using systematic processes that integrate theory and practice. Such systematic processes should begin by codifying an integrated theory of organizational performance and using it to develop and test HRD evaluation standards. The resulting evaluation standards may be used to certify the quality and usefulness of HRD products. The standards could serve as the foundation for providing neutral information to those who purchase and use HRD products. Moreover, the HRD evaluation standards could serve as drivers for change and performance improvement across organizations. The AHRD could update the standards and the certificate on a timely basis to reflect new knowledge. In this way, the HRD certification would provide an on-going driver for change and performance improvement within the profession.

Consumer Organizations: Aims and Activities

Recent decades have witnessed the rise of consumer organizations. This emancipation of the consumer has improved the position of the consumer through three distinctive avenues: 1) information, 2) education, and 3) protection. Most consumer organizations defend the free market system, and one of their most important activities is comparative product testing (Box, 1982).

Comparative product tests aim at providing objective and independent information (Silberer, 1985). The information is obtained independently of producers or suppliers and emphasizes the consumers' interests. Objectivity can be achieved by using general norms and standard procedures of measurement. Research is done either in-house or contracted to independent institutions. Often, consumer organizations show their objectivity by not including advertisements in their magazines and by stressing their independent and even critical attitude towards the industry (Jackel, 1989).

According to Kanis (1988), the most important object of research for consumer organizations is the technical and economic functionality of products. This is a measure of the satisfaction of needs. The functionality of a product results from the interaction of the product's specifications, its user, and its environment (Siderius, 1989).

The testing activities of consumer organizations encompass consumer-oriented and product-oriented research. Consumer-oriented research directly involves the consumer, mostly by means of interviews or questionnaires. Taste tests are an example of this kind of research. Product-oriented research is limited because the consumer is not involved in testing the product (Batsell & Wind, 1980).

Product characteristics generally fall into two categories: external and non-external characteristics. External characteristics can be established and evaluated by simply describing the product characteristics or making inquiries about their value. Non-external characteristics require a more extensive analysis. Typically, the evaluation of non-external characteristics is done through extended observation to determine durability, usability, and longevity of the product. Many comparative product tests focus on testing external characteristics. For example, a comparative test report for automobiles contrasts model reliability, product dimensions, and expense.

Consumer organizations produce data. In fact, comparative product testing often yields large quantities of data. Willenborg (1985) summarized the kinds of information that are often found in comparative product testing:

- Descriptive and evaluative information, which allows consumers to obtain insight about the market in a relatively risk-free and low-cost way.
- Presentation of brands, models, and types of one class of product at a certain point in time.
- Mass quantities of information (e.g., detailed description of characteristics, measurement results, comparative overall critiques of products and recommendations for "best buy").
- Limitation of sustained validity in the case of rapid model change and fluctuation of prices: typically retesting is necessary.

Regardless of the type of research used, published test results have two important functions: 1) presenting products and brands to consumers and 2) supplying comparative information on quality aspects of the products. They provide neutral product information to help consumers select products that fulfill their needs.

In applying this information to developing and implementing HRD certification, we should consider that the research could be done in-house by the AHRD, by a partner organization, or by contracting the work to independent institutions. Because many members of the AHRD are affiliated with universities and research institutions, identifying independent institutions capable of such research should not prove a difficult task. Evaluation standards that are based on an accepted theory of performance could be developed. Such standards could be applied systematically to assess the technical quality of HRD products, focusing on the external characteristics. Also, HRD consumers could be asked to provide feedback on HRD products as a means of assessing economic quality. The results could include certified products plus synthesized reports of information for consumers.

Measurement Issues

Clearly, measurement is at the heart of certification and consumer reporting. Before discussing how measurement issues can be addressed for HRD certification, we first overview the four critical measurement requirements for product testing as described by Siderius (1989). Most of these criteria are interrelated. All are necessary and none alone is sufficient.

First: Reliability.

In product testing, reliability is the degree to which repetition of the measurement produces the same or similar results. Reliability is contingent upon conformity and reproducibility. Conformity is the degree to which repetition of the measurement with different samples of a product (with identical characteristics) produces the same or similar results (product variation). Reproducibility is the degree to which repetition of the measurement on the same object produces the same or similar results.

Second: Validity.

In product testing, validity is the degree to which the measurement results reflect the functionality of a product as experienced by the consumer. Validity involves three primary considerations: internal validity, measurability, and interpretability. Internal validity is the degree to which the variables of use and the environment are included in the research conditions; measurability is the degree to which the product characteristics or functions of the product can be translated into measurable quantities; and interpretability is the degree to which the test results can be translated into different aspects of the functionality of the product. The reader should note that Siderius's description of validity focuses only on quality of utility and addresses neither technical or economic quality.

Third: Relevance.

In product testing, relevance is the degree to which the product information enables consumers to buy and use products that contribute to satisfying their needs. The products tested by consumer organizations many times are varied and random, but Siderius (1989) offers the following considerations for determining relevance:

- Importance of the product tested and its characteristics
- Degree of detail used in presenting the test results on the product's functionality
- Value judgment on certain product features relative to the product's functionality
- Availability of the product information
- Understandability or clarity of the available product information

Fourth: Feasibility.

In product testing, feasibility focuses on the amount of resources that have to be allocated to do the testing. For example, are the required methodologies at one's disposal?

To answer our earlier question about the feasibility of HRD certification, we should consider the measurement issues. Careful thought reveals that the measurement issues required for HRD certification (i.e., reliability, validity, relevance, and feasibility) are the same measurement issues that the AHRD community of scholars and scholarly-practitioners face in doing their normal work. The AHRD is uniquely positioned to assume the role of HRD certifier because its members include academicians and practitioners. Further, its members have a deep understanding of the measurement issues and respect for all HRD stakeholders. Its members also understand that, as with all efforts of HRD research and practice, no measurement system exists that is perfectly reliable, valid, relevant, and feasible. More importantly they believe that linking HRD research with practice is a way to make a difference and to produce improvements for individuals, groups, and organizations.

Benefits Of HRD Certification

AHRD certification will serve as a driver for performance improvements that benefit individuals, organizations, and the HRD profession. Earlier we discussed Swanson's (1997) assertion that some are benefiting from the substandard conditions that exist in the HRD field. Now is the time to ask, "Who pays? The answer is that we all pay. Organizations pay when decision-makers purchase substandard HRD products that do not improve organization performance. Individuals pay when they invest energy, commitment, and hope in substandard HRD products that do not produce the promised results. HRD professionals pay when the organizational members and decision- makers, who have previously paid the costs of substandard products, begin viewing HRD products as unnecessary expenses rather than investments in future performance. It is time for AHRD members to assert that the costs of substandard work are too high. We should stop paying.

AHRD certification of the programs that certify HRD professionals will drive individual change by assuring that individuals are knowledgeable and skillful in the theory and practice of HRD. It will drive organization change by motivating those who produce and sell HRD products to adapt their offerings to meet standards grounded in theory rather than in the latest fad. Vendors who can demonstrate that their products meet the HRD standards will benefit from a marketing advantage. Consumers of HRD products can use the certificate as one source in making purchasing decisions. HRD consumers and vendors both benefit from sharing more accurate understandings of organizational performance and theory and expectations for how HRD interventions contribute to it. The HRD profession benefits from the credibility that results when research informs practice and practice inform research.

Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that HRD certification provides the AHRD with a strategy for leading the HRD profession through research. We answered the question, "Why certify?" by referencing the AHRD values, the size of the HRD investment, and the problems caused by the lack of HRD certification. We answered the question, "Is certification feasible?" by examining product testing and consumer reporting in other arenas, clarifying the measurement issues, and recognizing that the measurement issues for certification are similar to those that the AHRD community of scholars and scholarly-practitioners routinely face in doing their normal work. By developing and implementing HRD certification for professionals, products, and programs, the AHRD can enact its vision of leading the HRD profession through research. Further, the AHRD can provide a service that benefits individuals, organizations, and the entire profession. Given the enormous benefits to be gained, the feasibility of certification, and the AHRD values, we believe that *now* is the time to develop and implement HRD certification.

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